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Top Ten Reasons to Support the D.C. School Choice Initiative

In his Fiscal Year 2004 budget proposal, President Bush requested \$75 million for a new Choice Incentive Fund, and requested that a portion of those funds be reserved for the District of Columbia. The new fund would increase efforts to provide parents more options for obtaining a quality education for their children who are trapped in poor-performing schools. Funds would be granted to state, local and community-based nonprofit organizations which have a proven track record of providing such opportunities.

Top D.C. officials already have publicly spurned the proposal – thereby denying District students stuck in low-performing schools the opportunity to attend a private school for free. Here are ten reasons why students in the District of Columbia may need this opportunity most of all.

1. The District of Columbia school system's spending-per-pupil ranks among the highest in the nation – \$9,650 per pupil compared to a national average of \$6,627.¹ Yet:
2. Only 6 percent of the District's fourth and eighth graders were found "proficient" in math in the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress.²
3. Only 5 percent of the District's eighth graders were "proficient" in science, and zero percent were "advanced" in science.³
4. District students ranked last in the nation in both SAT and ACT scores in 2001.⁴
5. In 2001, private school students in D.C. scored an average of 1200 on the SAT while District public school students' average score was 798 – an average which placed them more than 200 points below the national average.⁵
6. Forty-two percent of District students drop out of school, compared to 31 percent nationally. Students averaged an 83 percent attendance rate in 2002, a ranking behind all states but Alaska's.⁶

7. *Fifty-six percent of District residents polled in 1998 were in favor of vouchers.*⁷
8. In 1997, 1,000 partial tuition scholarships were offered to needy families in D.C. and nearly 10,000 applications were received.⁸
9. A recent study of urban children who utilized school choice opportunities showed that African American students who were in a private school for three years scored 9.2 percentile points higher on composite reading and math tests than comparable public school children.⁹
10. One frustrated D.C. teacher described his classroom this way:
 “I was so busy trying to quell anarchy that I never had a chance to get to know my new students, let alone teach them anything. [The Principal] abandoned all pretense of administrative support. Nearly every student I sent to the office returned within minutes. This lack of consequences encouraged a level of violence I never could have imagined among any of my students, let alone second-graders. Fights broke out daily – not just during recess or bathroom breaks but also in the middle of lessons. And this wasn’t playful shoving: we’re talking fists flying, hair yanked, heads slammed against lockers. When I asked other teachers to come help me stop a fight, they shook their heads and reminded me that D.C. Public Schools banned teachers from laying hands on students for any reason, even to protect other children.”¹⁰

The President’s offer of a school choice program for D.C. students demonstrates the continuing Republican belief that all children deserve a safe and productive learning environment. By furthering school choice initiatives, Republicans can bring about a more child-centered education policy, empowering parents and offering more children safe and successful learning opportunities, no matter what their zip code.

Notes:

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000.
2. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000.
3. National Assessment of Educational Progress , 2000.
4. “Report Card on American Education: A State by State Analysis,” American Legislative Exchange Council.
5. “A Five Year Statistical Glance at D.C. Public Schools, School Years 1996-97 through 2000-2001.” D.C. Public School System.
6. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000.
7. Deroy Murdock, “Voucherize District’s Schools?,” *The Washington Times*, January 15, 2003.
8. Murdock.
9. Daniel P. Mayer, et al., ‘School Choice in New York City After Three Years: An Evaluation of the School Choice Scholarships Program,’ Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2/19/02.
10. Joshua Kaplowitz, “How I Joined Teach for America – and Got Sued for \$20 Million,” *City Journal*, Vol. 13. No. 1, p. 16-26.